



Food Scientist Arthur Ness Speaks the Language of Food Safety

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Contact: Raechelle Cline, 608-224-5005

Jim Dick, Communications Director, 608-224-5020

EDITOR'S NOTE: This story is one in a series featuring DATCP employees and their programs.

MADISON – *Bacillus cereus*, *Campylobacter jejuni*, *Clostridium botulinum*, *Cryptosporidium parvum*, *Escherichia coli*, *Listeria monocytogenes*, *Norovirus*, *Salmonellosis*, *Shigella*, *Toxoplasma gondii*. These words, for most of us, are part of an exotic foreign language, but they are all part of a common language used by Arthur Ness and his colleagues in the Division of Food Safety at the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP). It's the language of foodborne pathogens and Ness has made it his business to become fluent.

For the past twelve years, both as a Meat Scientist and a Food Scientist, Ness has worked daily to protect the food supply from the many disease-causing microorganisms that have the potential to inflict illness on unsuspecting consumers. Though he and his co-workers are known throughout the division for their humorous pranks and witty banter, the subject they work with is no laughing matter.

"My background is in microbiology, specifically medical microbiology, which deals with human pathogens. That's the primary focus of food safety and all its aspects--making sure there are no pathogens in our food," Ness says.

Ness knows a little bit about what it takes to identify and eliminate problematic products from the food supply after 37 years with DATCP. He started as a meat inspector in 1975 and worked his way through a variety of positions including meat safety consultant, meat scientist and now as a food scientist since 2004. But his journey continues later this month when Ness will become the section chief for technical services in the Meat Safety and Inspection Bureau. He will supervise six meat safety consultants and one meat scientist statewide.

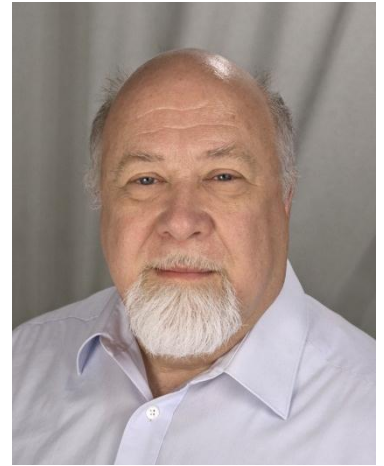
"What we will do is provide technical help and support to our staff and industry, while also answering questions from the public about meat safety," Ness says, adding that education is a primary component of his efforts.

"A lot of what we do is education. The more people know, the better able they are to make the proper decisions and take appropriate actions to prevent bad things from happening," he says.

Nonetheless, Ness has seen his share of bad things happen in the food industry. There have been any number of crises during Ness' tenure including illnesses related to *Campylobacter*, *E. coli*, and *Listeria*.

"Those are the things we deal with because we have to, but it's not exactly exciting," Ness says adding that if "everybody does things as they're supposed to, we don't have to deal with crises." But, there are so many places in the chain where the process can break down, he explains.

"We can do everything possible from farm to service and then you get some young kid at a fast food restaurant who doesn't fry the burgers completely and people get sick," he says. "It's always a challenge."



Arthur Ness has worked in the Division of Food Safety for almost 38 years to help protect the food supply from foodborne pathogens.

Ness' next big challenge is the implementation of an interstate meat shipment program for the state of Wisconsin. Interstate shipment is a project several decades in the making that will enable select processing establishments that are inspected by just the state to ship meat and poultry products across state lines. They can't do that now. Officials see several benefits to allowing these state-inspected establishments to ship their products across state lines including the potential to expand rural development and jobs, increase local tax bases, strengthen rural communities, and ensure that food is safe for consumers.

As section chief, Ness will lead the department's efforts to provide technical support to the industry by providing training and establishing procedures for determining things that plants must do to achieve "same as" status with the USDA and also identifying the things that his inspectors must look for and document to ensure that the plants are doing that.

"It's never been done before and the staff, with the exception of two veteran meat consultants, is completely new, so we'll be starting from the ground up, inventing something that has never existed before. It's interesting and challenging and there is no right or wrong answer; it just has to work," Ness says of his new venture.

Ness is a lifelong resident of Wisconsin. He grew up in Prairie du Sac and attended the University of Wisconsin-Madison earning a B.S. degree in medical microbiology and immunology. He is also a Registered Sanitarian, FDA Retail Standard and a USDA Enforcement Investigation and Analysis Officer (EIAO). When asked if this is what he always pictured himself doing, Ness says it's not.

"It's been so long I'm not even sure anymore. One just sort of stumbles into a career and the next thing you know, you've been there for 10 years, or 37. At this point, I'm too old to start over, too young to retire and too poor to quit, so I just keep going," he says. And go he will, onto his next endeavor to provide safe food for the masses.

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